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FOR NEA/ARP

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TAGS: PGOV PREL YM

SUBJECT: ROYG SUPPRESSES DEMONSTRATIONS WITH TANKS AND PLANES

Classified By: Ambassador Stephen A. Seche for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶11. (C) The ROYG used military force including tanks, other armored vehicles and aircraft to suppress demonstrations in southern Yemen on April 1. The protests, which stemmed from an incident where military applicants from Dhale were refused enlistment, continued today, with many demonstrators arrested and at least one reportedly killed. This incident is the latest in a string of increasingly hostile confrontations in the governorates of the former South Yemen. As the Secretary General of one of Yemen's opposition parties told POL/E Chief, quelling demonstrations by force is unlikely to improve the situation. End Summary.

Demonstrations Turn Ugly in Dhale and Lahj

¶12. (C) On April 2, Secretary General Yassin Noman of the opposition Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) asserted to POL/E Chief that, on April 1, the ROYG used tanks, armored vehicles and aircraft to disperse demonstrators in the southern governorates of Dhale and Lahj. (Note: A security source told EmbOff that pickup truck-mounted 50-caliber machine guns were deployed instead of tanks in Lahj. End Note.) Early the same day, according to Basha Bashraheel, editor and owner of the Aden-based independent al-Ayyam newspaper, security forces raided houses to arrest what he described as "everyone with a role in protests in the South in the last eight months." Noman told POL/E Chief that a total of 15 people had been detained, including "six or seven" members of the YSP.

¶13. (C) The protests have continued, according to Ahmed al-Hajj of Associated Press. On April 2, citizens of Dhale were back in the streets in greater numbers. He said that hundreds of protestors were arrested and one had been killed. The rioters include disaffected youths, retired military officers, and their supporters. Leaders of the protest movement reportedly made speeches calling for "southern liberation" from the northern-dominated regime while orange flags of the former People's Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) were openly displayed by demonstrators.

How Did We Get Here?

¶14. (C) Noman confirmed to POL/E Chief press reports that a refusal to admit youths from Dhale into the military had precipitated demonstrations that, earlier in the week, had included protestors carrying a donkey to the headquarters of the ruling General People's Congress (GPC) in Dhale, chanting, "No donkeys after this day," and pelting the building with stones. (Note: The symbol of the GPC is a

stallion. End Note.) The protestors also attacked governmental facilities and shops, and paralyzed traffic. He claimed that the ROYG had promised to hire local youths but, when over 500 young men from Dhale showed up at an induction camp in Reem in the neighboring governorate of Ibb, only 10 were given jobs. Bashraheel added that officials mistreated and humiliated the applicants. One officer reportedly told unsuccessful applicants "if you want jobs in the army, bring your mothers to beg for you first."

¶15. (C) Dhale has been the epicenter of anti-government protests in southern Yemen. Most of the military leaders of the former PDRY were from Dhale or Radfan in the neighboring Lahj Governorate. Dhale was also considered a stronghold of southern nationalism in 1967, when South Yemen was a British colony. Dhale is semi-tribal in nature and most of its people are perceived as "warriors." Dhale was the only local council in which the opposition Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) won a majority in the September 2006 elections.

¶16. (C) The demonstrations have adopted an increasingly separatist tone in recent months as the Saleh regime reacts to the mounting civil unrest with increased repression and cosmetic gestures that fail to address the underlying issues. Noman told POL/E Chief, "If the regime continues to try and solve problems with force, there will, of course, be a reaction." A statement issued on April 1 by the rally's organizers blamed the Saleh regime for undermining national unity, demanded the return of plundered land, and called for an international investigation into political murders and arbitrary detention practiced against southerners.

¶17. (C) Speaker of the Parliament Yahya al-Raie told the Ambassador today in no uncertain terms that the ROYG blames the current spate of unrest in the South on opposition

parties who, Raie asserted, are abusing the liberties afforded them under the democracy Yemen has worked so hard to achieve. He claimed, as other senior ROYG officials have done, that the opposition wants to force more concessions from the government, and will use any means to achieve this end. Noman drew a line between party affiliation and southern unrest. He averred that, while there are YSP members among the protestors, there are non-affiliated people as well, and even GPC members. He emphasized that the YSP is working to resolve the nation's problems within the context of unity, but acknowledged that some party members had left because of its pro-unity stance.

Al-Jazeera: Let's Go to the Tape

¶18. (C) An interesting side note to the demonstrations is that Al-Jazeera was able to broadcast footage of them. For the last several months, any non-ROYG film crew that has tried to film demonstrations in the South has been harassed and, in many cases, had their film confiscated. An Al-Jazeera contact told PAO how the ban been circumvented. The film was not shot by an Al-Jazeera crew. It had been passed by what the contact described as "activists." The fact that these activists were able to prepare broadcast-quality film shows a degree of organization and media savvy not seen previously among southern protesters.

What's Next?

¶19. (C) While claiming not to be pessimistic, Noman was far from positive in his view of the situation in the South and throughout Yemen. "Frankly," he said, "I am afraid." He added that when he looked at the future in Yemen he saw it "pregnant with problems." He described the mood of the country as "boiling" and complained that the ROYG's refusal to solve the underlying issues that cause southerners to feel discriminated against only "sharpens" those problems.

Comment

¶10. (C) Noman is far from impartial in his assessment of the situation. He is the Secretary General of the party the ROYG is trying to blame for southern unrest. Further, at least six of his fellow party members have been arrested and may or may not have been transferred out of the South to Sana'a. This being the case, he has reason to see events in a jaundiced light. His opinion, however, is representative of the view of many Yemenis who see the ROYG refusing to make needed reforms to address discontent in the South (and throughout the country). If the ROYG continues to substitute suppression for reform, many feel the problems will only worsen. End Comment.

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